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ABSTRACT

The lack of research on grading policies for handicapped students is pointed out, and results of a survey completed by 14 high schools in New Hampshire are summarized. Results reveal a variety of grading and graduation approaches including weighting grades or courses, developing a basic level curriculum geared for students having academic difficulty in the regular classroom, and using goals specified in students' individualized education programs. A list of 10 common concerns about grading (including that parents are not usually receptive toward alternate methods of grading and that teachers need more training on ways to evaluate student ability and progress) was revealed from the survey, and findings emphasized the need for districts to establish equitable policies regarding grading, credits, and graduation requirements for handicapped students. (CL)

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Task Force for the Improvement of Secondary Special Education in New Hampshire

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GRADING PRACTICES FOR EDUCATIONALLY HANDICAPPED STUDENTS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: ISSUES, PROBLEMS, AND NEEDS

by

Robert Lister

Most secondary schools still employ a letter grading system to evaluate the performance of students. Typically, schools report student progress in the familiar symbols A, B, C, D, and F. Although letter grades bear a relationship to normative data, they do not necessarily reflect the student's level of academic achievement or mastery of content in a specific area. In most schools, the letter grade is derived as a result of factors such as class participation, attendance, completed assignments and test performance. Letter grades also can be influenced by other factors, including the teacher's attitude toward the student. In the past, letter grades have been promoted because the grade point average (GPA) appears to be a predictor of college performance and is used in scholarship awards. Also, it is believed by some that grades are motivating for students.

Many difficulties are encountered in developing grading policies. They include philosophical differences and a general lack of consensus as to how the issue should be addressed. Regular educators disagree regarding the process grading of non-handicapped students, as well as handicapped students. The issue of an established grading policy for all students is of great concern in many school districts.

Certain issues, problems and needs are common to many districts. The types of handicapped students and available programs and support services vary. Developing grading policies should not be viewed as changing "standards." However, it should be seen as a means of allowing students to be as successful as possible. The establishment of a grading policy also provides a district with an opportunity to establish or review policies and procedures for dealing with other issues related to credits, diplomas and graduation.

Research Findings

Grading has been the focus of several research studies concerned with non-handicapped students. In a recent computer search, no studies were identified that specifically related to handicapped students. Evans (1976) conducted research on the topic of grading which strongly indicates that

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grades not only cause students to cheat, but also reduce individualized instruction. In addition, he states that grades are subjective, are unrelated to the objectives of education, and reduce the self-esteem of students.

Some schools have introduced alternatives such as pass/fail or contracting for grades. One area for further investigation may be mastery or criterion level grading systems that take into account the abilities, and learning styles of individual students.

According to Pike (1973), one alternative to traditional letter grades is the pass-no pass option. Although there are several variations, the pass-no pass concept usually implies that a student may have a choice in the selection of some courses for which his grade will be either a pass or no pass - thus effectively bypassing the traditional A, B, C, D, F procedure. In a controlled study of secondary social studies students, it was found that the academic achievement of students in pass-no pass classroom learning experiences was similar to achievement of students graded with the traditional letter grade. However, the pass-no pass system was found to allow more flexibility in the entire grading system and students appeared to have more motivation.

Lewis (1978) describes the pass/revise grading system. The principle behind this method is that, given proper instruction, a student who successfully completes a learning assignment should be given full credit for his/her work. Some students may complete the assignment the first time, while others may require additional instruction before finishing. All should be given full credit as long as they satisfactorily complete the work. Thus, the assignments in the course are not given a grade. Instead they are marked as "credit" or "no credit." Students who do not receive credit are then given extra help and told to repeat either the original assignment or a similar assignment. The process is repeated until the student either completes the assignment satisfactorily or the deadline for the assignment is reached (ideally there would be no deadline). The beauty of this method is its flexibility. Often assignments can be given which are impossible to grade in the traditional way, (e.g., Why does a student have to receive an F because s/he could not write a poem?). This method simplifies the averaging process. Each student can be assigned a B at the beginning of the quarter. Demerits will depend on the number of assignments given during the grading period. In order to receive an A, bonus and additional assignments are available.

Several other alternative grading systems have been developed:

1. Written evaluation - may be in narrative form.
2. Self-evaluation.
3. Contract System.
   a. Type of work to be graded
   b. Quantity of work for each grade
   c. Quality of work for each grade
   d. Method of grading
   e. Who is reponsible for grading
   f. What is to be learned (contract learning)
4. Peer grading.

Whatever the choice of evaluation process, it should focus on the individual rather than on a group; be skill based; be adaptable on a multi-grade level range; be reasonable and not rigid in time requirements; and accommodate social, behavioral, and personal factors relative to the student's growth and learning. It should be based on each individual's achievement and not on comparison with other students. The evaluation should indicate the degree of mastery each student has attained relative to the performance objectives of the course.

The best reporting procedure for any school or school system can only be determined after careful study of the needs and philosophy of the school's educational program (Warner, 1978). Glasser (1969) has stated that grades are so important that they have become a substitute for education itself. He also believes that grades are limiting and damning for life. Students who continually receive poor grades have poor self-images and believe that they cannot succeed. It is imperative that teacher preparation programs help teachers to gain a better understanding of how to evaluate their students.

New Hampshire Grading Practices

In a brief telephone survey of several local secondary schools by this author, several principals and guidance directors were asked what grading system they used to evaluate their students. All stated that students received traditional letter grades. However, they clarified their statements by describing the kind of diploma or certificate of attendance students received, which was somehow a reflection of their skill abilities. In February of 1983, a request for information regarding the grading policies of handicapped students was sent to a random sample of high schools in New Hampshire. Of the fourteen high schools that were surveyed, four provided policies (Portsmouth, Hanover, Keene and Stevens High School); one school (Manchester Memorial) stated that one grading system was used for all students; two schools (Nashua and Londonderry) stated that they were in the process of studying their grading policies; and seven schools did not respond. In addition, the Nashua Children's Association voluntarily provided information regarding their grading practices.

Portsmouth High School Grading Policy:

Each high school course is numbered for the purpose of eliminating possible misunderstanding in selecting courses, and for providing a weighted scale for figuring class rank.

An example of course value is:

	Quality Points
Rigorous Academic Course (Calculus, Physics)	4
Academic Course	3
General Course	2
Remedial Course	1
Special Education	0

An example of grade value is:

	GRADE VALUE
A	4
B	3
C	2
D	1
F	0

Rank in class is based upon Quality Points x Grade Value:

Rigorous Academic Course, A	=	4 x 4	=	16 points
Academic Course, A	=	4 x 3	=	12 points
General Course, A	=	4 x 2	=	8 points
Remedial Course, A	=	4 x 1	=	4 points
Special Education, A	=	4 x 0	=	0 points

Weightings are multiplied by final grades, and the products are totaled for rank in class.

Students on IEP's could in fact receive A's and B's for individual work and ability, be placed on the honor roll, (which is good for self-concept,) but not show up in the class rank. School staff believe that this policy is appropriate, especially for mildly retarded students, because they are more likely to become employed than to enroll in a college program. Class rank is significant primarily for purposes of college entry.

Out-of-district students who are tuitioned into Portsmouth High School receive the same type of grades and accumulate credits in the same way. If they remain in the program throughout their high school careers, and if the placement team feels that all goals and objectives have been met, they are eligible to graduate and receive a regular high school diploma. In 1979, the Portsmouth School Board established the following policy:

> "Students identified as handicapped will receive a Portsmouth High School Diploma upon completion of the student's individual Education Plan and upon the recommendation of the Student Evaluation/Placement Team to the High School Principal and Coordinator of Special Services."

There is no distinction between students who are involved in resource room programs and students who are fully integrated into regular academic and vocational programs. The placement team process is the same.

Stevens High School - Claremont - Grading Policy:

During the 1981-82 school year, a group of educators developed a basic level curriculum designed to assist any student having academic difficulty in the regular classroom. In order to enhance the performance and overall success of students enrolled in basic level

courses, the program offers remedial course work, tutorial assistance, basic learning materials, independent living skills, and vocational opportunities.

The major objective of the basic program of study is to lessen student frustration by making available more realistic required and elective courses, and to allow all students to leave High School with a viable education and direction for the future.

The basic level curriculum will utilize an S, F grading system. This grading system was selected to eliminate competition with such courses as academic chemistry and will hopefully allow more student success and teacher flexibility. All students enrolled in basic level courses will be graded under the following method:

S1 Superior course work
S2 Above average course work
S Meets basic requirements of the course
F Fails to meet basic requirements of the course

Individual teachers will outline the grading system, explain course expectations, and establish grading criteria. An individual evaluation sheet defining student progress also will be disseminated quarterly.

Hanover High School Policy:

Grades or courses are not weighted. However, the grading section of the student handbook states that "objectives may vary in order to challenge each and every student to work to his/her fullest capacity." The associate principal of the high school stated that "grading, for us, is as much a statement of individual progress as it is of achievement of arbitrary standards or subject matter limits." It should be noted that this policy is currently under review.

Nashua Children's Center Grading Description

"Quarterly objectives explicitly outline a skill or task to be accomplished as well as the performance accuracy or frequency ... These quarterly objectives identify for the parent the specific skills their child is capable of accomplishing.

The quarterly student progress reports are used in conjunction with the quarterly objectives of the I.E.P. The progress report uses three letter grades: A, B, and C. An 'A' designates that the child has exceeded the quarterly objective. A 'B' designates that the child has met the quarterly objective. A 'C' designates that the child has not attained the quarterly objective. And a 'BC' designates that the child has met the stated objective but inconsistently. The I.E.P. is developed so that the student can attain B grades and progress. This helps a student feel good about his grades and progress. It lifts his

self-esteem and interest in school. (This system has proven itself effective in use with emotionally-handicapped and learning disabled students who characteristically have low self concepts.)

... a student must be provided with academic challenges. If the child has received A's in an area, the objectives are made more challenging; if C's were received, the objectives will be reduced to an obtainable level so that the student is not overwhelmed."

Keene High School Grading Policy:

1. All coded mainstreamed students receive regular grades and credits for graduation.
2. All coded students within the Resource Room receive regular grades based on individual ability and receive credit toward graduation.
3. Students within our self-contained programs receive grades and attend graduation at the age of 21. (If they have the ability to understand graduation.) They receive a certificate of attendance.
4. We have given credit for OT and PT in place of Physical Education; and have given cooperative education grades and credit for part-time employment at sheltered workshops.

We try to be as flexible as possible and to find alternative ways to grant credit rather than releasing students from that requirement.

Londonderry High School Informal Policy:

We have not developed a formal policy as yet. All of our currently identified handicapped students are capable of completing the high school graduation requirements and daily classroom requirements at their level of placement. We have a series of class levels which take into account the various needs of these students. Students are graded at their level of placement according to goals specified in their IEPs. If a student is not successful at a particular level, we change his/her placement and/or goals to meet his/her needs. For example, the levels in ninth grade English would be as follows:

English Learning Resource 9 (Resource)
Fundamental English 9 (Learning Disabilbities)
Team English 9 (Regular class with Special Education teacher)
English 9 Level 3 (Regular class)
English 9 Level 2 (Regular class)
English 9 Level 1 (Regular English highest level)

We are presently considering a formal grading policy and certificate of completion.

Policy Development Processes

Most schools stated that their policies were established through a committee that consisted of several staff members, administrators, parents, and, in some cases, a student. The three schools which provided information on formal policies stated that these policies are not without

critics and/or controversy. Each policy appears to have been developed according to the school's need for a defined statement regarding educationally handicapped students, and to generally reflect local policy.

When a group of special education teachers was asked which issue most often generated conflict with classroom teachers, they reported that it was almost always related to report cards. Conflicts apparently arise due to the classroom teachers' feeling that they are not prepared to effectively evaluate special needs students in the regular curriculum. Even though they are assisted by special education personnel, classroom teachers make the final decisions.

Discussion

Information presently available in the literature, from personal contacts and from a sample survey of New Hampshire's high schools, suggests that the following concerns and attitudes regarding student evaluation and grading are most prominent:

- Traditional letter grades are most widely used for grading.
- Parents anticipate letter grades and usually are not receptive toward alternative methods.
- Grading should motivate students.
- Poor grades have a tendency to cause students to become frustrated, act out and lack self-esteem.
- Grades should decrease anxiety about school and expectations.
- Grading should meet individual learning styles.
- Grading should be relevant and reflect what is to be learned.
- Teachers need more training on how to evaluate student ability and progress.
- Teachers are concerned with the issue of accountability and grading especially for special needs students on IEP's.
- Parents and students need to be involved if change in the grading system is to occur.

The variety of alternatives presented in this paper reflect information gathered from current research and a survey of several New Hampshire schools. Districts have tended to be overwhelmed by federal and State special education mandates and IEP's. Only recently have many districts begun to look at another somewhat controversial issue...policy for grading handicapped students. It is doubtful that any one grading policy can meet everyone's needs. However, it is generally agreed that a policy for grading handicapped students must appropriately measure student progress and/or learning, but should not single these students out as different from their peers.

It is essential that school districts establish equitable policies regarding grading, credits, and graduation requirements for handicapped students.

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BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Dr. Robert Lister is the special education department chairman at Portsmouth High School. He has written other articles for the Task Force and other informational sources.